Sketch

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August Day

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Abstract

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THERE had been no rain since the beginning of July, and it was now the second week in August. The grain had already been harvested; neat stacks of oats and barley stood beside the barn waiting for the threshing rig. It was the corn they were worried about; it had looked so nice in June, so glossy green, and if you stood very still you could almost see it grow. Then July had come, a burning, sweltering July with no pity for the corn; with jealous envy of it, perhaps, for the corn had had to sap its own strength to keep on growing, had had to draw on the precious moisture in the ground, day by day, until now there was none left and the stalks were turning brown and dry. Long had they been praying for rain when this August day dawned.

The morning seemed no different from any other morning when Mr. Gerald went out to help the trucker load up the hogs. He was taking them to the packing plant at Sioux Falls that morning, and was a little worried that they seemed not quite fat enough. No matter—he had to take some of them now; perhaps the rest would bring a better price later on. He greeted the trucker cheerfully and they loaded the squealing hogs into the truck.

Jimmy, eight years old, with his tousled hair still uncombed, hopped from one place to another entreating, "Dad, can I go along to Sioux Falls, Dad, huh? Can I? You promised I could go next time you went, you know you did, can I go Dad, huh?" endlessly, over and over again like a persistent fly, and receiving about as much attention.

Finally Mr. Gerald turned to him and said, "Not this time, Jimmy; I'm going with Mr. Mell in his truck. Besides, we're just going in to the stock-yards, boy. Run in and see if Mama wants anything from town. Run along now."

Jimmy turned and walked back to the house, trying not to cry. But it was hard. Dad had promised—! He wouldn't cry; only babies cried, and if Saggy saw him she'd tease. Saggy was his

sister Sara, who was going to be twelve years old. She had acquired her nickname long ago, when she hadn't quite been able to make her sounds right.

In the kitchen, Jimmy's little brothers, Ray and Tommy, were eating their breakfast oatmeal, and his mother was washing the separator. Through the door he could see Saggy sitting on her feet in a rocking chair reading a magazine. He explained his errand to his mother and ran back out again with the slip she gave him, Ray tagging after.

He gave the slip to his father and announced importantly, "Mama says she wants some lemons so we can have lemonade for Saggy's birthday," while Ray, who was only six, had started to beg for the privilege of going to Sioux Falls with no more luck than Jimmy had had. At last everything was ready and they stood together to watch the truck, with their father, Mr. Mell, and the squealing hogs pull out of the yard and disappear out of sight over the first little hill.

As the day wore on, the atmosphere changed perceptibly, and by noon black clouds had rolled up against the horizon. The sky was overcast, the air hot and heavy, except when an occasional stray fresh breeze hurried past and was lost again.

"It's going to rain, I think," said Mrs. Gerald to the children. "We must get the chickens in." Saggy came running; she had forty-four little chickens that were just getting tiny feathers in their wings. "Quick, Saggy! Boys! Here, Tommy, you watch us through the window." Tommy was only three. "It's starting already."

The children scurried out and Mrs. Gerald followed, picking up a tub from the porch to put Saggy's chickens in. The rain had started to fall—large, lazy drops.

"You take care of yours, Saggy," said her mother; "the boys and I will try to get the others into the chicken house."

The rain fell fast as mother and children hurried about the yard, coaxing the chickens to shelter. A large number of them were huddled in the plum thicket; Ray made a dash at them but his mother called, "Let them be, Ray, till we get the others; they may be all right there."

The children were bare-footed, and Ray and Saggy ran about happily, mud squishing through their toes as they pounced upon the little chickens and put them into the tub. Jimmy was not happy. He kept close to his mother and grabbed her frantically

at each clap of thunder and each flash of lightning. Jimmy was afraid of storms.

"Mama," he gasped, after a particularly loud thunderbolt, "Mama, is it going to be a cyclone? Let's go in the house, Mama!" His voice rose and ended in a scream as he hid his face in her sleeve.

His mother stopped a moment and patted his arm "It won't be a cyclone, Jimmy," she said. "It's always real still before a cyclone, and there was a wind. Don't you remember? See, it's blowing now. You run in the house now and play with Tommy. Perhaps he's frightened."

Truth to tell, Tommy was not frightened. He was jumping up and down before his window, gurgling to himself as he watched the others hurrying about the yard. His mother could see his little head bobbing in the window and had no fears on his account, but Jimmy must be pacified. She wondered how he came to be so much afraid of storms, unable to remember a time when he had not been. The rain came down hard. Saggy had collected all of her chickens and was carrying the tub to the porch. Mrs. Gerald turned to help Ray herd the bedraggled chickens from the plum thicket into the henhouse, then ran with him to the house just as the hail started falling.

The mother turned and offered a silent prayer. Oh God, not that! Not hail! She remembered when they had talked of hail insurance. They couldn't afford it really—there were so many places for every dollar—and it wasn't likely to hail. Not much anyway. Not enough to do any damage. White-faced, Jimmy clutched at her skirt.

"I wish Daddy was home," he sobbed. "Why doesn't Daddy come home?"

The hail was pelting on the roof, rattling down on the porch and off again. Oh, the size of it! Hail as big as teacups, falling, falling. The ground seemed covered with snowballs. After a time interminably long to the mother standing there with her arm around the little tousle-haired boy, the knocking on the roof lessened, stopped, but for an occasional thud. Saggy and Ray ran out with a kettle to gather up the fairy stones in the yard, shrieking and laughing, retreating to the porch now and then, as they narrowly dodged a new hailstone from the sky.

The storm was over now, and Jimmy ran out with his brother and sister. His fear had faded with the thunder and lightning,

and he delighted in gathering the icy balls. The mother was silent as the children ran in with their kettle to empty it into the dishpan now heaped with ice.

"Aren't they big, Mama?" Saggy asked. "We can put them in our lemonade when Daddy comes home, can't we, Mama? It'll be real ice-lemonade like in town. Oh, fun!"

Mrs. Gerald had taken Tommy on her lap and was soothing him to sleep. She looked up at Saggy and tried to smile. "That's right, Sara. Daddy should be home soon now."

Her words were prophetic, for the truck, at that moment, drove into the yard. "Speak of the—" started Saggy, but, seeing her mother frown, stopped and ran out into the yard, where the boys were already clambering around their father.

"It's a deuced shame, Henry," Mr. Mell was saying, " 'fraid you won't have any corn. Man o'man, but it looks wors'n if the grasshoppers had got it! Clean stripped! Well, guess I'd better be gettin' home."

"Thanks, Ned." said Mr. Gerald. "I guess you're right. The corn's gone. Well—g'bye, Ned."

He carried the package of groceries into the house, then turned and went out again. He walked first to the garden—there was nothing left. The plants were stripped, flattened. Ned was right. It was worse than grasshoppers—not that the grasshoppers hadn't been there too. He turned back, his shoulders drooping. Why hadn't he insured! He knew why he hadn't, why he probably wouldn't next year. He remembered three years ago when the hail had destroyed the crop—grain too, that year, and they'd pulled through. They would again, he supposed. It'd be hard sledding just now, with prices rising.

He stopped at the hog house and was appalled to find several windows broken. Some were shattered, but there was one with a cleancut round hole where a hailstone had gone through. He wondered if any of the house windows had been broken. Probably not; the hog house windows were on a slight slant. Sighing heavily, he turned back to the house, quite oblivious of Jimmy and Ray, who had been tagging after, talking incessantly, now to him, now quarreling with each other.

Saggy was standing on the porch in raptures over a rainbow in the east—a clear, bright rainbow with a somewhat paler double above it. She was almost sure she could see where one end of it came down, over in Johnson's pasture, and was wondering if her

mother would let her run over and look for the pot of gold. The boys had stopped and were looking at the rainbow too. It was beautiful, and the air was fresh and clean. Mr. Gerald's spirits rose as he looked at it. In the house Mrs. Gerald was watching it, too, as she made sandwiches for lunch, and squeezed lemons.

"Lunch is ready, folks," she called.

The heaviness came back to Mr. Gerald. "Mary," he said, "the corn—the garden—the hail has ruined everything."

The mother was silent a moment. "It makes nice lemonade," she said.

Restless Fever

Phyllis Wendt

Wandering, lost—no steady shining light—
I rub my lamp, cry to the rising genie to end my search.
The voice comes low, insistent, "I serve.
Declare your God!"

How should I answer? My Gods are many—
The God of scientific attitude, trial and error, the impersonality of a swollen puncture from a hypodermic needle;
The God of faith and blind belief, the old traditions;
The God of printed words, the wild grey dust of age-old brains condensed to neat black rows of type;
The God of changing seasons—Spring swishing her skirts, provocative, as she ambles on toward June, or Fall gingerly cupping the last bit of Indian summer in the curled palms of a dozen brittle leaves;
The God of steel heights, shining rails and blinking signals, smokestacks pulling streams of clouds along the sky;
The God of quietness and night, warm human nearness, love and oneness.

What is my God?
I turn to ask the genie,
And find only sewer steam that curls before the sidewalk light.